

# Autumn upon Eagle Creek

By **TIM TRAINOR**  
East Oregonian

The Eagle Creek trailhead can be intimidating.

It's always crowded — too many cars, too many people, too much asphalt. None of which are good signs for backpacking.

But don't let the parking lot fool you. Eagle Creek is the premier backpacking destination in the Columbia River Gorge, especially in the shoulder season when crowds thin out, the leaves begin to color and the salmon return.

In fact, half the cars in the lot seem to belong to salmonid seekers, eyeing the black orb of fish flesh circling below like an oceanic bait ball. Except in this case, the creek is only a few feet deep — inches deep in some places this dry fall — and the hundreds and sometimes thousands of fish are gargantuan, especially the chinook. The first half mile of the hike reeks of dead fish, and the sounds of salmon flipping their bodies upstream echoes through the narrow gorge. Carcasses litter the rocky shore and visitors can watch salmon spawn with unrivaled reliability and ease of viewing.

But we're talking about backpacking here. Even lugging the extra weight, the two-mile climb up to Lower and Upper Punchbowl Falls is mild. The view, however, is astounding. Still, they are just two of innumerable waterfalls you encounter on the trail. And yet for a majority of hikers this is the turn-around point. Blast through this area and the trail traffic drops considerably.

A word about the trail: It was built in the early 1900s and was among the earliest attempts at preserving some of the wildness of the Gorge. In some of the most difficult-to-traverse sections, dynamite was used to blast a clear, safe passage through what had been vertical basalt cliffs. In some of the narrowest sections, cable lines have been built into the walls to provide stability. Yet it can be dangerous. There have been multiple deaths on the trail in the last decade, most often people jumping and falling off the cliffs above Punchbowl Falls.

There are too many waterfalls to count and name along the journey: Metlako Falls drops more than 100 feet, Loowit Falls falls from what



Staff photo by Tim Trainor

From around a moss-covered bend, Upper Punchbowl Falls can be seen from the bed of Eagle Creek. The trail passes by dozens of spectacular waterfalls and offers an excellent backcountry experience in the fall.

### How to get there:

The only way to access the trailhead is to take the Eagle Creek exit off eastbound Interstate 84. To get there from Eastern Oregon you'll have to drive past, exit at Bonneville Dam and turn back in the opposite direction. You can't miss the trailhead. The parking lot is located just upstream of the fish hatchery, almost at the end of the freeway ramp.

seems like the center of a rock into a pool below. There's also Skoonichuck, Grand Union, Twister and Sevenmile Falls.

And then there's the jaw-dropping Tunnel Falls, the highest on Eagle Creek.

Located 6.6 miles from the trailhead, it plunges 130 feet into a small bowl at the bottom of a horseshoe-shaped basalt amphitheater. And the treat for hikers and backpackers is that the Eagle Creek Trail passes behind the falls, through a tunnel blasted into the

cliff about halfway up (or down, depending on your outlook on life and waterfalls).

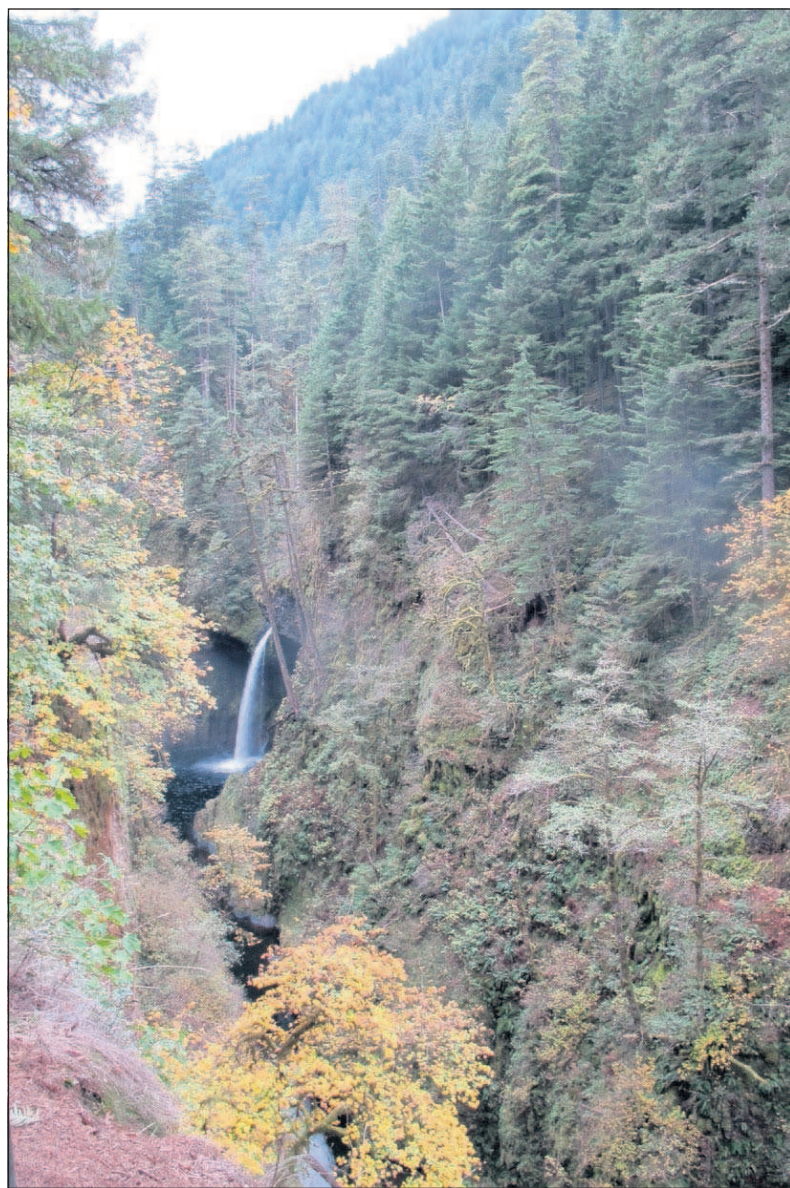
The trail is extremely narrow and slick, so take advantage of the cable rails where available. But don't miss the opportunity to hold out your hand and feel the spray of mid-air waterfall, and peer down over your toes at the pool below.

Tunnel Falls is a good goal for a day hike. Hikers could bring lunch, eat it at the base of the falls and make it back to the car with daylight to spare. But quickly upstream from Tunnel, more waterfalls abound and you soon find yourself in the Mark O. Hatfield Wilderness, with ample opportunities for perfect streamside camping and the sound of rushing water to put you to sleep.

The Seven and a Half Mile Campground is a mix of regulated and less-regulated campsites near the creek. Get there on a summer Saturday, and it may be slim pickings to find a fire ring and a level place to lay a tent. But in autumn, even the weekends find the most straight-outta-paradise campsites unfilled. Seven and a Half Mile is a perfect place to dip your toes, start a fire (check seasonal regulations) and spend the night.

In the morning, depending on how much time you can get off work, you can continue your journey upstream.

This is the Columbia Gorge, and there are plenty of other options for continuing, including Watum Lake, which requires a more serious climb. For multi-day experiences, the classic Eagle-Benson or Ruckel Ridge loop hikes are



Staff photo by Tim Trainor

In this photo taken Oct. 24, leaves begin to turn on Eagle Creek. Crowds along the busy trail thin out in the shoulder season, but the scenery improves. That makes it a good time to visit.

off-recommended, or you can hike to the Wauna Viewpoint or join up with the nearby Pacific Crest Trail.

Or you can head back down the way you came, noticing stunning waterfalls you missed on the way up. Eagle Creek is like that. Stunning vistas and landscapes that would knock your socks off most

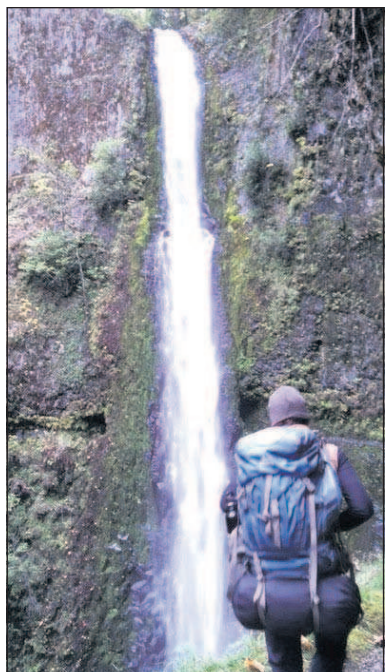
places have a hard time sticking out here, where every step is a stunner.

Tim Trainor is an avid backpacker. Have a hike he should check out, or an outdoor adventure story you'd like to tell? Email him at [ttrainor@eastoregonian.com](mailto:ttrainor@eastoregonian.com).



Staff photo by Tim Trainor

Eagle Creek drops out of multiple waterfalls before it tumbles into a deep, slow gorge beneath High Bridge, along the Eagle Creek Trail.



Staff photo by Tim Trainor

The Eagle Creek Trail snakes behind 130-foot Tunnel Falls, through a tunnel blasted out more than a century ago. But tread carefully — the trail is wet

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